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Viewing cable 09CARACAS355, CODEL DELAHUNT MEETINGS WITH CHAVEZ AND FOREIGN

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09CARACAS355	2009-03-20 20:58	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Caracas

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.semana.com/nacion/wikileaks-venezuela-chavez-reconocio-nunca-debio-mediare-farc/159344-3.aspx>

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000355

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SUBJECT: CODEL DELAHUNT MEETINGS WITH CHAVEZ AND FOREIGN
MINISTRY - MARCH 19

CARACAS 00000355 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (C) Summary: After a briefing by the Charge', Congressman Delahunt discussed bilateral relations alone with Foreign Ministry (MFA) officials and ALBA Bank President and former Ambassador to the United States Bernie Alvarez on March 19. He also met alone with President Chavez and Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicholas Maduro during the night of March 19. Delahunt told the Charge afterward that he encouraged Chavez to push the "reset" button on bilateral relations. Chavez told Delahunt he would mention this idea during his March 22 "Alo, Presidente" broadcast and would like an "appropriate" USG response. Chavez and MFA officials reportedly expressed interest in renewing counternarcotics cooperation, but did not specify a way forward. Chavez is interested in restarting informal inter-parliamentary dialogue (the "Boston Group"), to which Delahunt responded that members of Venezuela's opposition need to be included. Delahunt said he also urged that the Venezuelan government cease harassing U.S. Embassy operations and fire the problematic MFA Protocol Director. End Summary.

MFA EXPLORES IMPROVING BILATERAL RELATIONS

¶2. (C) Congressman William Delahunt (D-Mass) visited Caracas on March 19. After a briefing by Charge, Delahunt met alone with MFA Chief of Staff Temir Porras, ALBA Bank President and former Ambassador to the United States Bernie Alvarez, and Venezuela's CDA in Washington Angelo Rivero for a three-hour lunch. Delahunt told Charge later that this meeting focused on the group's interest in "normalizing" the bilateral relationship. They spent some time discussing Delahunt's meeting with President Chavez later the same night and offered points for the Congressman to raise. Delahunt said he told the MFA officials that ongoing harassment of U.S. Embassy operations is an obstacle to improving relations, and they responded by acknowledging their responsibility. Porras blamed Chief of Protocol Ramon Gordils for provoking many of the problems, and Delahunt suggested Gordils be fired. Porras suggested that the Congressman should raise the point directly with Chavez.

¶3. (C) Delahunt reported that the MFA officials responded positively to Delahunt's call for greater counternarcotics cooperation, but did not offer any details on moving forward on the issue. Delahunt also met later that evening with Foreign Minister Nicholas Maduro in his office for nearly two hours, where Delahunt said they covered the lunchtime topics. In addition, Maduro discussed reestablishing relations with the U.S. at the ambassadorial level. Delahunt said Maduro wanted to find a way to do this intandem with Bolivia. Maduro and his aides also probed Delahunt extensively on the details of the U.S. ambassadorial confirmation process.

CHAVEZ AGREES TO A "RESET"

¶4. (C) Foreign Minister Maduro, ALBA Bank President Alvarez, Maduro Chief of Staff Porras and Venezuelan CDA in Washington Rivero accompanied Delahunt to the Miraflores Presidential Palace. Only Foreign Minister Maduro joined the Congressman's two-and-one-half hour meeting with Chavez. According to Delahunt, Chavez expressed an interest in improving bilateral relations, including exchanging ambassadors. Nevertheless, he complained about what he perceived as the Obama administration's criticism of him. To make his point, Chavez read quotations from President Obama's interview with Spanish-language Univision TV, the Venezuela section of the 2009 Human Rights Report, the International Counternarcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), and statements from the Secretary. Delahunt reminded Chavez that he had been highly critical of President Obama and the United States. Delahunt also told us he raised the issue of GBRV

harassment of US Embassy operations as an impediment to normalizing relations. Delahunt noted that such petty gestures were not in the interest of either country, a point he said that Chavez conceded.

¶5. (C) Delahunt said he suggested that relations need to be "reset." Chavez seized on this idea and said that he would discuss the idea of hitting a "reset" button on bilateral relations and his hope for an "appropriate" U.S. response during his weekly Sunday "Alo, Presidente" television and radio broadcast slated for March 22. Delahunt told Chavez that the United States wants to maintain a dialogue with all countries, and reiterated the point in the brief press conference that followed his meeting with the Venezuelan president. According to Delahunt, Chavez had received a readout of President Obama's meeting with Brazilian President Lula from the Brazilians. Statements from Porras and Maduro indicate that GBRV officials believe Obama raised the delays in US diplomatic visa issuance. Chavez reportedly seemed disgruntled that, of all Venezuelan issues, this was the one that the Presidents ended up discussing.

¶6. (C) Chavez suggested that the United States Congress and the National Assembly (AN) should revive the "Boston Group" -- an informal group of interested U.S. Congressman and AN deputies who fostered inter-parliamentary dialogue. Delahunt said he was receptive to the idea but told Chavez that in order for the program to be acceptable, it would have to also include opposition AN members. (Note: Maduro, while serving in the AN, participated in the "Boston Group." The group has been inactive since 2005 when the Venezuelan opposition boycotted parliamentary elections. Five members of the National Assembly subsequently constituted a U.S.-Venezuelan Parliamentary "Friendship Group" to promote inter-parliamentary dialogue. The four PSUV members started excluding a Podemos deputy from the group's infrequent activities after Podemos broke with the government in late ¶2007. End Note.)

CN COOPERATION?

¶7. (C) Delahunt said he discussed with Chavez the dangers of narcotrafficking to Venezuela's national stability, specifically underscoring the threat posed by narcotrafficking groups and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Chavez accepted this and expressed interest in improving counternarcotics cooperation with the United States, but did not provide specifics. The Venezuelan president said that he is considering proposing a South American "drug council" to build inter-American cooperation to combat drugs. Chavez said he also wants to improve relations with Colombia, which he sees as an important economic partner. Chavez asserted that he recognized after the fact that his involvement in last year's FARC hostage negotiations was a mistake, and claimed he had admitted as much to President Uribe.

¶8. (U) Representative Delahunt did not have the opportunity to review this report.

CAULFIELD